

# The THOREAU SOCIETY BULLETIN

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## THE CENTENNIAL MEETING AT CONCORD

July Fourth was a bright and sunny day in Concord and by ten o'clock in the morning a crowd of nearly one hundred people had gathered at the cairn at Walden Pond to pay tribute to Thoreau on the one-hundredth anniversary of the beginning of his Walden Pond experiment.

The meeting was opened by Allen French, chairman of the Concord committee who read a letter from our society's president, Raymond Adams:

"Henry Thoreau went to Walden to live just at the time that young Americans of his generation were going to live on the frontier in the region of the upper Mississippi River. Thoreau exhausted the frontier experience in a way that did not even occur to the pioneers themselves; and so, if the frontier is an American contribution to the life of the world, the 1845 venture of Thoreau's and his record of it nine years later in the book *WALDEN* may help us, as it has helped a great many people, to understand wherein the American quality of frontiers lay. It has been objected many times that Thoreau at Walden was too close home, that he could go to the postoffice, to his home at Texas House, to Emerson's home, to the lyceum, and to the store too easily. It would seem so. But it may not be as bad as that. If one is not dominated by the idea of size, Walden Pond, viewed with imagination enough, may be as good as the Pacific, and over the low hills to the west may as well lie the prairies as anything else. If one can 'travel much in Concord,' as Thoreau said he could, then one will not need to travel much beyond Concord, for the swamps and woods close by will be as inexhaustible as any. If one has but imagination enough, he can find the frontier, an edge of civilization, very close at hand indeed. It will be wherever one can push custom and prejudice aside and step forward with only those things necessary for living.

"The pioneer traveled light for no other reason than that it was inconvenient if not impossible to trundle a lot of goods through the wilderness. Once in the West the question still was how much, not how little; and he staked out as much of this rich, free land as was possible within the law and the competition of other stakers, and often entered into the same weary ordeal on his huge new farm as that remarked on by Thoreau in Concord among farmers whose farms bore them down, whose land owned them rather than they the land.

"Thoreau traveled light to Walden for a very different reason. He asked himself how little one could take in order to live the most human life, for it was his conviction that to be owned by things was a kind of slavery as real as that other kind under which one was owned by someone else, and that one sort of slave fell as far short of full humanity as another. So he took perhaps a wheelbarrow full of things to Walden together with four pieces of light furniture. There is danger that one will misunderstand Thoreau just here. He meant, and say as much, that the reduction should have for its aim the best human living, allowing time for thought, contemplation, and pleasure. If one has too much, he begins to use his time for the sake of things; and the things ride him rather than serve him. But if one has too little, then his thought is on things also--the things he lacks. Thought and contemplation, and more particularly the inflow of insight and inspiration are the human characteristics upon which Thoreau insisted. An animal might live without them; but a man could not. Any reduction of the means of living which cut under these human and godlike qualities was unthinkable to Thoreau.

But any reduction of the great accretion which man had permitted to cover his life which did not reduce down to and lay bare these same human and godlike qualities was equally unthinkable. There was a definite level which one must expose to the free air of divine influence. It was the quick and sensitive level where man's humanity and divinity met. Neither more simplification nor less could be tolerated."

Rev. Roland D. Sawyer of Ware, Mass., one of the founders of the society, spoke briefly, in part:

"In 1917 the Concord people justly observed the centennial of Thoreau's birthday. In 1941, lovers of Concord who live outside the town came here and united with the Concord people in forming the Thoreau Society. The idea of the society originated in the mind of a young man named Walter Harding, now the secretary, but then a school teacher in western Massachusetts, who approached some of us with the idea in 1940, and which was put forth to become a fact in 1941. Today the Concord friends of Thoreau have brought us together to observe the centennial of the date when Thoreau borrowed horse and wagon, brought here his few simple necessities, and started his two years of life in his 10 by 15 foot cabin.

"There is here today a spontaneity, lack of formality, that is in fine keeping with the soul and life of Thoreau. We come here to hear Thoreau's message read to us, take it away, and while here to meditate and think upon that rugged son of Concord, whose life meant so much to both the people of Concord and the larger non-Concord circle. We are a mixed gathering, we come from everywhere, and we differ in the reason of our loyalty to Thoreau. Some of us place greatest value on Thoreau's call to a love of Nature; others upon his keen and rugged way of thought and life; others upon his literary genius; others to his loyalty to Concord; but we are all here to pay just tribute to Henry David Thoreau, at the spot where he lived alone with Nature and his own soul for nearly thirty months."

T. Morris Longstreth read from Thoreau's Journals for July, 1845. Wallace B. Conant then read from *Walden* the passages describing the hut and his reasons for living there. Mr. Longstreth read Adin Ballou's Thoreau sonnet "The Completed Music." And the exercises were closed by Mr. French's reading of passages from Harry Lee's *More Day to Dawn*.

After the exercises, everyone was invited to an open house at the estates of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Seton and Mrs. Henry Thompson where punch and sandwiches were served.

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"I have thus a tight shingled and plastered house, ten feet wide by fifteen long, and eight-foot posts, with a garret and a closet, a large window on each side, two trap doors, one door at the end, and a brick fireplace opposite."

--Walden

A modern interpretation of the drawing of the Walden hut done for the title page of the first edition of Thoreau's greatest book by his sister Sophia. It is the most accurate picture we have today of Thoreau's hut and it is a pity that it has been dropped from practically all modern editions of *Walden*.



The centennial of Thoreau's going to Walden Pond has probably been commemorated by more school, museum and library exhibitions than all such previous exhibitions put together. Never do we recall so many rare bits of Thoreauana being on display at one time. From coast to coast admirers of Thoreau have seemed to vie to outdo one another. For the sake of the record we shall give a partial list of these exhibitions.

Top honors should go to the New York group which presented the largest display of Thoreauana ever to be assembled publicly--one hundred and eighty square feet of cases were filled with books, manuscripts, photographs, paintings and all sorts of memorabilia in the exhibition which was held at the American Museum of Natural History from mid-June to mid-July. Ten cases were arranged to show Thoreau's influence on contemporary thought, his position among the nature writers, foreign interest in his writings, his contributions to natural science, and related topics. Each case was worked out around one of these central themes and all the material in the case interrelated. The success of the exhibition was far beyond expectation. The leading city papers called it to the attention of their readers by both articles and editorials. Guides at the museum received an average of fifty inquiries a day concerning the display.

Thoreau's home town outdid itself in honoring its most famous native son. The Free Public Library devoted its entire gallery to Thoreau, featuring manuscripts, the Rowse crayon portrait and the new Louis Meyer bust. The Thoreau Museum at the Middlesex School dusted off its collection of Thoreauana and brought it forth for display. Even one of the drug stores on Mill Dam devoted a window to the Sage of Walden Pond.

Among the other exhibitions were ones in the Oliver Wendell Holmes Library of Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass.; Wellesley College library; Wellesley, Mass. Public Library; Plymouth, Mass. Public Library; Carver, Mass. Public Library; Smith College Library; Rutherford, New Jersey Public Library; and a particularly good one at the Bruce Museum in Old Greenwich, Conn.

The colleges and schools too have been commemorating the centennial with speeches and lectures. Among these are one by Walter Gierasch at the English Lunch Club of Phillips Academy; an Honors Convocation at the University of Colorado at which George Whicher spoke on Thoreau under the title "Integrity and Integration"; and an illustrated lecture at the University of Texas by Prof. Joseph J. Jones. The latter was later presented at Southern Methodist University by Prof. Leisy.

Thoreau-Group-itis seems to be contagious of late and we can think of few healthier diseases. We have often reported the doings of the Concord and New York groups. Now comes word from Washington, D.C. of a new group there. Steve Thomas, their secretary pro-tem, has reported on their first two meetings which have been held at the Cosmos Club. Discussion has centered around various essays on Thoreau, new and old, which have been read to the group. We hear that their discussions are expected to give birth to several new essays and we are eagerly awaiting their appearance.

Thoughts of new groups are percolating around Chicago and both northern and southern California. We'll be glad to let you know the details if you live in these areas. Judging from our mailing list, Thoreauvians are pretty well peppered through the Nutmeg State. Anyone in Hartford or New Haven interested in starting a group?

Arthur Brentano (SRL, May 19th) tells us that the first book sold in his Paris store when it reopened after the Nazi occupation was a copy of WALDEN sold to an American sergeant. He couldn't have picked a more appropriate book if he tried.

Those agile mental giants who succeeded in solving the Double-Croctic No. 577 (SRL, April 14) were rewarded by finding it to be a quotation from WALDEN. We must admit that we peeked at the answer the next week to find out.

They are still trying to pin the discovery of raisin bread on HDT. The latest is a squib in HOARD'S DAIRYMAN (Nov. 25, 1944). Does anyone know the source of the legend? We don't doubt that he had the courage to try it, but we think that the real raisin bread pioneer was some centuries ahead of him.

For years Thoreau scholars have discussed the cairn at Walden Pond marking the supposed site of Thoreau's hut. With the centennial celebration, the controversy has broken out into the open and become a public discussion. This quarter's bibliography, as you will note, is in a large part made up of letters to the editors on the cairn controversy. We haven't the room to reproduce all these letters here, but we can summarize a few of their main points.

For some years the generally accepted story concerning the cairn has been that it was started in 1872 by a Mrs. Mary Newbury Adams of Dubuque, Iowa and Bronson Alcott. You will find the incident recorded in Odell Shepard's condensation of Alcott's Journals.

This spring W. N. Tolman of Boston (who writes under a variety of pseudonyms in the NEW YORK SUN) claimed that he with the help of Thoreau's biographer Frank Sanborn and Sanborn's sons started the cairn a few years later and that if there were any earlier cairn it had disappeared by that time.

Adding to the general confusion over the origins of the cairn is another controversy over its location. For years it has been generally accepted that the cairn was not on the exact location of the hut site. A dozen or more years ago our society's president, Raymond Adams, and Raymond Emerson of Concord marked with four posts a cellar-hole some feet further back from the pond than the cairn. Now E. A. White of Concord points out that both the cairn and the cellar-hole are much further from the pond than Thoreau states in WALDEN and that it is impossible to see the railroad from either point which Thoreau states he could see from his cabin doorstep. Defenders of the cellar-hole site however reply that it is on almost the exact location marked by the cross on the map of Walden Pond included in the first edition of WALDEN and that if the underbrush were cleared out the railroad would easily be in view.

We shall not try to settle either controversy, at least not at this point, nor until we locate still further information. But we present the current theories for the record. Let us know if you can confirm or contradict any of them.

#### BOOK REVIEW

Iams, Jack. Prophet by Experience. New York: Morrow, 1943. 309pp.

Thoreau loved to laugh at the "men of one idea, like a hen with one chicken, and that a duckling." We hope that we, as Thoreauvians, do not fall into that sin too often. We admit that we are, hero-worshippers, but we hope that we retain at least an iota of objectivity about our hero. The last thing we would want to see would be Henry Thoreau enshrined as a sacrosanct little white god. A few years ago Bertha Damon set out after Thoreau, armed with a keen sense of humor, and in Grandma Called It Carnal produced one of our favorite bits of recreational reading. A few days ago we discovered another that belongs in the same category.

Jack Iams' Prophet by Experience is one of the zaniest bits of whimsy we have run into. Iams bids fair to be considered a sort of Preston Sturges of the literary world. At times he writes poorly and crudely. His humor is often on the custard pie level. But we must admit that we roared with delight over many a page of this book of delightful nonsense.

Hylobates Hoolock, a theological student, took to the woods of western Pennsylvania to live alone in a cave on a mountainside, devoting his time to basking in the delights of nature and reading his beloved Thoreau. For fifteen years his only contact with civilization was his weekly copy of a picture magazine based so obviously on Life that I wonder Mr. Luce hasn't brought suit. The editors of the magazine bring Hoolock to Manhattan to catch up on the great advances of civilization and report his impressions in its pages. Unwittingly he incidentally becomes editor of an advice-to-the-lovelorn column for a daily scandal sheet and candidate for a seat in congress. Few less Thoreauvian situations could be concocted, but Hylobates always manages to come forth with an appropriate Thoreauism. It's whimsical, it's zany, it's crazy. But if you want to see the Sage of Walden Pond taken for a playful joyride, we recommend Prophet by Experience.



Whicher, George F. Walden Revisited: A Centennial Tribute to Henry David Thoreau. Chicago: Packard, 1945. 95pp. \$2.00.

Thoreau has become a household name for an interest in nature, the ways of the birds and beasts, the flora and the fauna. Ever since his writings began to appear in print a century ago we have over-emphasized Thoreau the naturalist and almost completely obscured a far more significant man, Thoreau the thinker. It is rumored that one of our most capable American biographers has been working for some years on a study of the development of Thoreau's thought. It is a book we are looking forward to. But there is a book just now off the presses which foreshadows that coming volume. George F. Whicher's Walden Revisited is primarily concerned with Thoreau the thinker. It would of course be impossible to write a valid study of Thoreau without discussing his abiding love of Nature, but Prof. Whicher wisely uses that overworked theme only as a background for his study of Thoreau's thoughts.

Walden Revisited is a small book. It can easily be read in an hour or two. But it contains real ore. It is worth returning to and pondering over again. It is a book you will want on your library shelf. It suffers from the same fault as the writings of most of the Transcendentalists in that it is a collection of individual ideas rather than a well-developed artistic whole. It is a collection of thoughts rather than an integrated book. It breaks down into individual chapters and even into paragraphs. But do not let that frighten you. It would be hard to find a single paragraph in the book that is not provocative, that does not display insight into the mind of Thoreau. I know of no other volume that so well integrates Thoreau into the background of Transcendental idealism in which he lived. Prof. Whicher presents him not as a sport of nature but as the natural culmination of a "long process of revolt which originated in England in the seventeenth century and was carried forward by successive generations of Puritans and pioneers." Thoreau stands out like a mountain peak on the horizon, but unlike his beloved Wachusett he is not alone. There are foothills all around him and these foothills detract not one whit from his grandeur, his significance.

No matter how we face it, we must realize that Thoreau was a radical and that his philosophy is still essentially a radical philosophy today. He got down to the root of things. While Prof. Whicher has sometimes tread lightly, he has not hesitated to cope with this fact. His chapter on "Civil Disobedience" is the highpoint of his book and it rightly presents Thoreau as the complete anti-totalitarian that he was. "This man," he quotes Alcott, "is, indeed, the sole signer of the Declaration and a Revolution in himself--a more than '76--having got beyond the signing to the doing it out fully."

In glancing over the book I find that I want to quote from it again and again. As I have already hinted, it is a sententious book, as sententious as the work of any of the Concordians. As an artistic whole it falls short. There are some depths of Thoreau that it misses. But it is a worthy "centennial tribute to Henry David Thoreau," a keen interpretation of the Sage of Walden Pond, a book that you will want to read and ponder.

We have recently received a letter from Yeo. 2c James F. Loughran, USCG, Ward I-6, U. S. Naval Hospital, Farragut, Idaho from which we quote in part: "I am now hospitalized after having been returned from the Pacific Theatre. Within the next few months I will be getting a convalescent leave of 30 days (which) I wish to spend as close to nature as possible. I will be able to work during that period and would like to do so for someone who needs help on their land. Perhaps one of your members needs such help." If you can be of help, write directly to Yeo. Loughran.

Two books issued in recent months have chosen their titles from Thoreau. Hugh Holman's TROUT IN THE MILK (New York: Mill, 218pp.) is a mystery story which takes its title from Thoreau's famous quotation about circumstantial evidence. Charlie May Simon's STRAW IN THE SUN is the tale of her own three-year experiment in simple living in the Ozarks. Its title is from Thoreau's "I am startled that God can make me so rich even with my own cheap stores. It needs but a few wisps of straw in the sun."

With all the current interest in the origin of the cairn at Walden Pond, we were very much pleased when Miss Nellie Bigelow called our attention to an early document on its history. It is a letter which was written by a daughter of Mary Newbury Adams to Miss Bigelow's father, Dr. Edward F. Bigelow and which was published in his GUIDE TO NATURE for January, 1914. We are very grateful to the Agassiz Association, Inc., of Old Greenwich, Conn., for permission to reprint this letter.

"You asked me for a letter telling you about the beginning of the cairn at Walden Pond. This is as I remember it as Mr. Alcott told me about it afterwards when he took me to Walden to add my stone, and as I recall it from one of mother's lively letters.

"She was visiting the Emersons. Both Mr. Emerson and Mr. Alcott had spent many a winter evening at our fireside in our far away western home discussing philosophy and poetry with my father and mother, for they were all kindred spirits.

"On this day Mr. Alcott called at the Emersons for mother to take a walk in Walden woods. She was almost as devoted a lover of nature as you, Dr. Bigelow, and you know that is saying a great deal. She was of course delighted to go and when they reached the spot where Thoreau's little house used to stand, mother said it was a pity there was nothing to mark the place, so strangers might know it. 'Well,' said Mr. Alcott, 'a cut stone would hardly be appropriate, would it, for Thoreau?' She suggested building a cairn and then let everyone who loved Thoreau add a stone and said she was going to start it right then. She got a stone and with a little improvised ceremony laid it down in her own name. Then Mr. Alcott got one for himself and one for Mrs. Alcott. Then mother laid a stone for my father. She was a poetical, original sort of a person, with a musical, expressive voice and a radiant face. Mr. Alcott stood by half amused at the blessings his young friend was invoking, half in fun, but also half in earnest, upon the future memorial to his friend.

"Suddenly they noticed down through the bushes some eyes looking at them. There was a Unitarian picnic somewhere in the grounds and a party of gentlemen had strolled over to the spot. Noticing something unusual going on and recognizing Mr. Alcott, they had slipped behind the bushes to see what it all meant. They now came forward, introduced themselves and asked what they were doing. When it was explained they wished to add their stones, and brought some friends. The next morning Mr. Emerson went up and added his stone.

"That was in June, 1872. I remember there was a pressed wild rose in the letter that told of this, which mother said grew close to the hole where the little foundation had been.

"Mother's name was Mrs. Mary Newbury Adams and my father was Austin Adams, Chief Justice of Iowa. We lived on one of the high bluffs overlooking the Mississippi at Dubuque.

"I am sorry that I cannot show you those valuable letters of which I spoke, and which I know would interest you, but my brothers I find have put them into a bank vault with other choice things that we found after their death."

William Archer has called to our attention a note in a recent Huntington Library Calendar. "An original manuscript, the page-proof with the author's corrections, and the resulting first edition, opened each to the same passage of Thoreau's WALDEN, point to the experimentations playing through the mind of an author to the last moment before publication. At the bottom of the proof is the baffled typesetter's comment: 'Can't read the MS.'" Having puzzled over a great many of Thoreau's manuscript letters, we know how that typesetter felt.

The secretary has on hand a few copies of the Miriam Allen deFord condensation of WALDEN mentioned in our bibliography some months back. The price is 25¢. Ira Hoover has also donated a quantity of his good little pamphlet on "The Centennial of Henry David Thoreau." We are selling these for 10¢.

Do not forget to remind the electors of the Hall of Fame to vote for Thoreau. Ballots were distributed in May and will be collected in the fall. There is a complete list of the electors in the April bulletin.

We are grateful to John Rea of Urbana, Ill. for designing the new masthead used in this bulletin.



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We are greatly indebted to the many members who have sent word of many of the articles listed above. If you have seen any we have missed, please send us word so that we may list them in the next bulletin.

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This bulletin was issued by the secretary of the Thoreau Society, Walter Harding, 670 West 165th Street, New York 32, N.Y.